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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role that stress in school and the family plays in early adolescents' adjustment during the transition from elementary to middle school. A total of 773 students (388 boys and 385 girls) from suburban communities in the northeastern United States were assessed at 3 time points: spring of Grade 5, fall of Grade 6, and spring of Grade 6. The students completed a school stress survey, daily hassles questionnaire, perceived social support scale, self-perception profile, depression inventory, and linking school scale. The results indicated that school stress at the beginning of the school year was an important predictor of the adjustment to the transition to middle school, over and above the affects of prior adjustment. Social support from family and teachers at the beginning of the school year was found to have both direct and indirect buffering effects. In addition, students who had more stress and experienced more depression in Grade 5 were likely to find the move into middle school more stressful than those students who experienced less stress and depression. (Contains 11 references.) (MDM)

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Stress, Social Support, and Adjustment During the Transition to Middle School

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Poster presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Washington, D.C., April, 1997. Requests for the complete paper may be directed to Melodie Wenz-Gross, Ph.D., Center for Social Development and Education, University of Massachusetts Boston, 100 Morrissey Blvd., Boston, Massachusetts, 02125.

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ABSTRACT

Early adolescence is a time in which change occurs within almost every domain of experience -- physical, social, cognitive, familial, and educational. Recently researchers have begun to focus on the educational changes that occur during early adolescence, in particular, the transition to middle school. This transition often brings heightened stress in both the school and family contexts. At the same time, the home and school environments can provide social support that may buffer the negative effects of these stresses.

This poster includes partial data from an ongoing longitudinal study of 773 students (388 boys and 385 girls) who made the transition from elementary to middle school. Assessed were: school stress; family stress; social support from family, peers, and teachers; and adjustment in terms of self-concept; feelings of depression, and liking of school.

Time-lag hierarchical multiple regressions showed that controlling for 5th grade adjustment levels, poor adjustment at the end of 6th grade was related to higher levels of school stress and less social support from family and teachers. Support from family buffered the negative effects of school stress on both self-concept and depression. Social support from teachers buffered the negative effects of school stress on liking of school. Conspicuously absent was any significant relation between family stress and adjustment, particular in predicting feelings of depression. Similarly, peer social support did not play a role, either directly or in terms of buffering stress, for any of the adjustment outcomes. In addition, separate regression analyses revealed that 5th grade levels of stress and depression predicted students' experience of school stress during the transition, and in turn, school stress during the transition predicted students' level of school stress at the end of 6th grade.

The results highlight the importance of school stress and social support from family and teachers in early adolescents' adjustment to the transition to middle school. Further, prior depression appears to heighten early adolescents' experience of stress during this transition.

INTRODUCTION

Early adolescence is a time in which change occurs within almost every domain of experience -- physical, social, cognitive, familial, and educational. Most adolescents handle these changes without developing problems. However, for some adolescents, this period can be a time of increased stress that can significantly affect adjustment (Eccles et al., 1993).

One area of potential stress is the transition to middle school, which entails major changes in both the academic and social domains (Elias et al., 1992; Munsch & Wampler, 1993). Academically, the structure of the student's learning environment becomes more complex than in elementary school, and expectations for academic achievement increase (Eccles et al. 1993). Socially, students must deal with a larger and more fluctuating peer network, at a time when, developmentally, relationships with peers intensify and take on greater significance in defining the self (Elias et al., 1985). Students also must deal with more negative student-teacher relationships that can be marked by greater distrust, and an emphasis on teacher control and discipline; this at a time when adolescents seek greater autonomy and personal choice (Eccles et al., 1993). Family stress and strain also can increase as adolescents strive for greater independence (Small, Eastman & Cornelius, 1988).

The stress that occurs, both in the school and in the home during the transition to middle school, is believed to negatively affect adjustment, particularly in terms of lowered self-concept, feelings of depression, and decreased motivation for school (Eccles et al., 1993). However, adolescents' resources for social support may also impact adjustment either directly, or indirectly by buffering the negative effects of stress (Hirsch & Dubois, 1992; Wenz-Gross, Siperstein, Untch & Widaman, 1997). Therefore, in looking at adjustment to the transition to middle school, attention also must be given to adolescent's resources for social support.

What is less clear is whether adolescent's experience of stress and social support at the beginning of the year, has any impact on adjustment at the end of the year. Further, it also is unclear whether certain adolescent characteristics including adjustment prior to middle school may impact the adolescent's experience of stress during this transition.

AIMS

1. To examine prospectively, the role that stress in the school and the family plays in early adolescent's adjustment during the first year of middle school, taking into account prior adjustment.

2. To examine prospectively, the role that social support from family, friends, and teachers, plays in potentially buffering the negative effects of stress, as well as directly influencing early adolescent's adjustment during the first year of middle school, taking into account prior adjustment.

3. To examine the role that adolescent characteristics, including gender, presence of learning problems, and adjustment prior to middle school, plays in early adolescent's experience of stress during the first year of middle school.

PROCEDURES

Participants were 773 students (388 boys and 385 girls) who made the transition from elementary to middle school. Students were from suburban communities in the northeast; 15% were minority; 14% were receiving special education services for learning problems. Students were assessed at three time points, spring of 5th grade, fall of 6th grade, and spring of 6th grade. See below.

Measures	Spring of 5th grade	Fall of 6th grade	Spring of 6th grade
School Stress Survey (Wenz-Gross, et al., 1997)	X	X	X
Daily Hassles Questionnaire (family stress subscale; Rowlison & Felner, 1988)	X	X	X
Perceived Social Support Scale (Procidino & Heller, 1983)		X	X
Self-Perception Profile for Children (global self-concept subscale; Harter, 1985)	X		X
Children's Depression Inventory-Short Form (Kovacs, 1992)	X		X
Liking School Scales (Wenz-Gross, et al., 1997)	X		X

Directions and items for all questionnaires were read aloud. Spring surveys were administered during two sessions to avoid student fatigue.

RESULTS

1. School stress at the beginning of the school year was an important predictor of adjustment to the transition to middle school, over and above the effects of prior adjustment. Surprisingly, family stress was not related to any of the measures of adjustment.

2. Social support from family and teachers at the beginning of the school year had both direct and stress buffering effects. Family support buffered stress in adolescents' feelings of depression and feelings about self. Teacher support, on the other hand, buffered stress in adolescents' feelings about school. Surprisingly, peer social support was unrelated to adolescent adjustment to middle school.

3. Students who have more stress and experience more depression in 5th grade are likely to find the move into middle school more stressful.

CONCLUSIONS

1. When looking at the interplay of stress and adjustment, the school stress that adolescents experience when entering the middle school impacts their year-end feelings of depression, feelings about self and feelings about school. But at the same time, adolescent's adjustment in terms of feelings of depression prior to entering middle school increases their experience of stress upon entering middle school.

2. When describing the relationship between social support and adjustment, social support plays a strong role, both affecting adjustment directly, and buffering the negative effects of stress. Further, the role of social support is made clearer when delineating the source of support--family, teachers, or peers. While the adolescent period is seen as a time when peers play an increasingly important role, early adolescence is still a time when parents and teachers maintain a central role in helping adolescents deal with stress and adjust to their changing environment.

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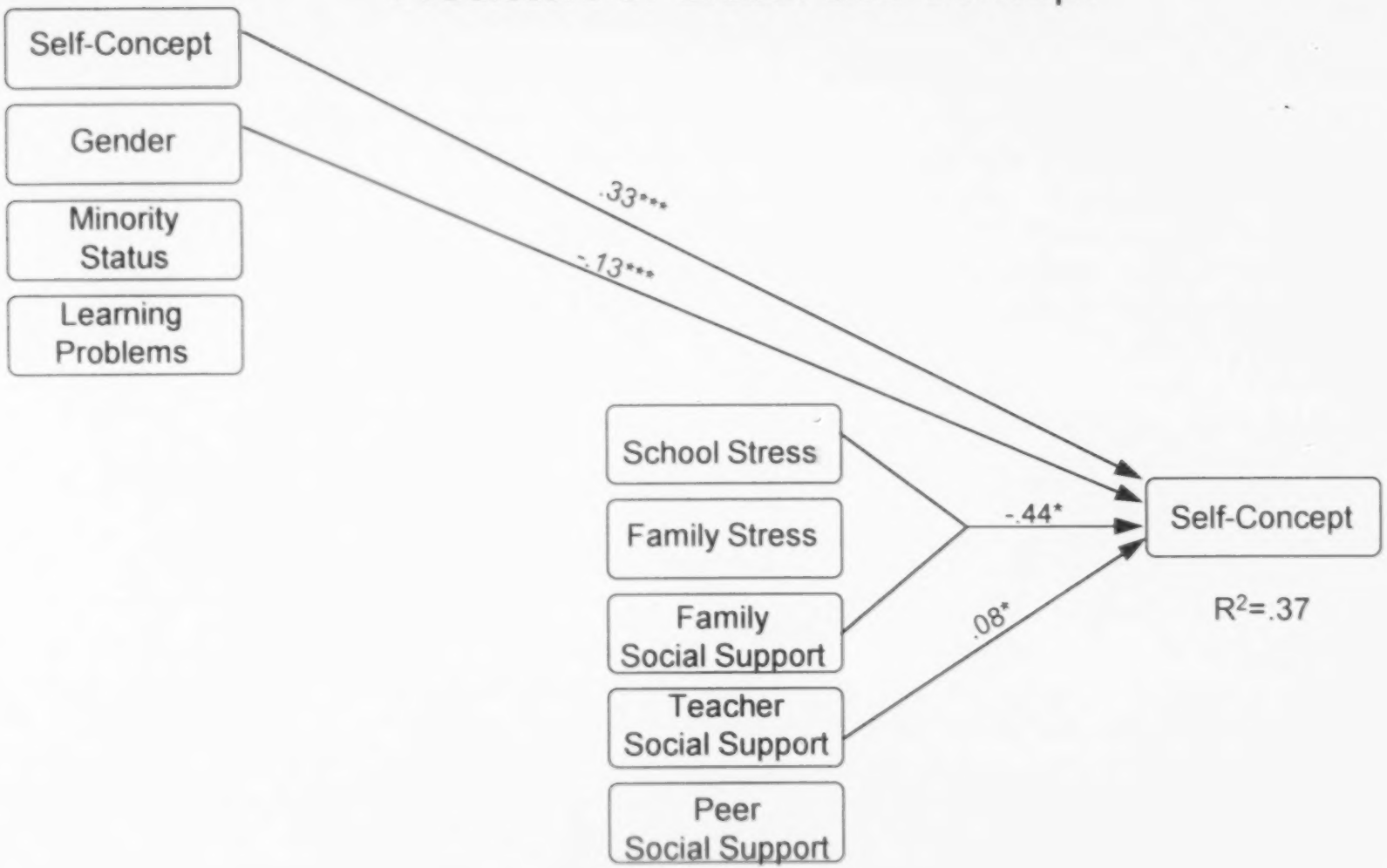
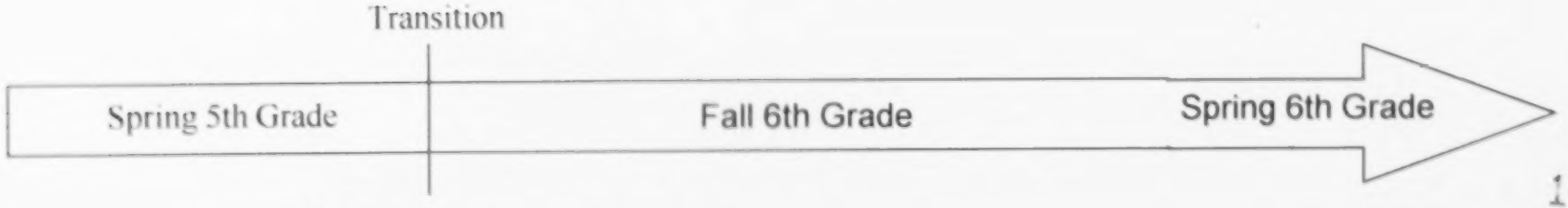
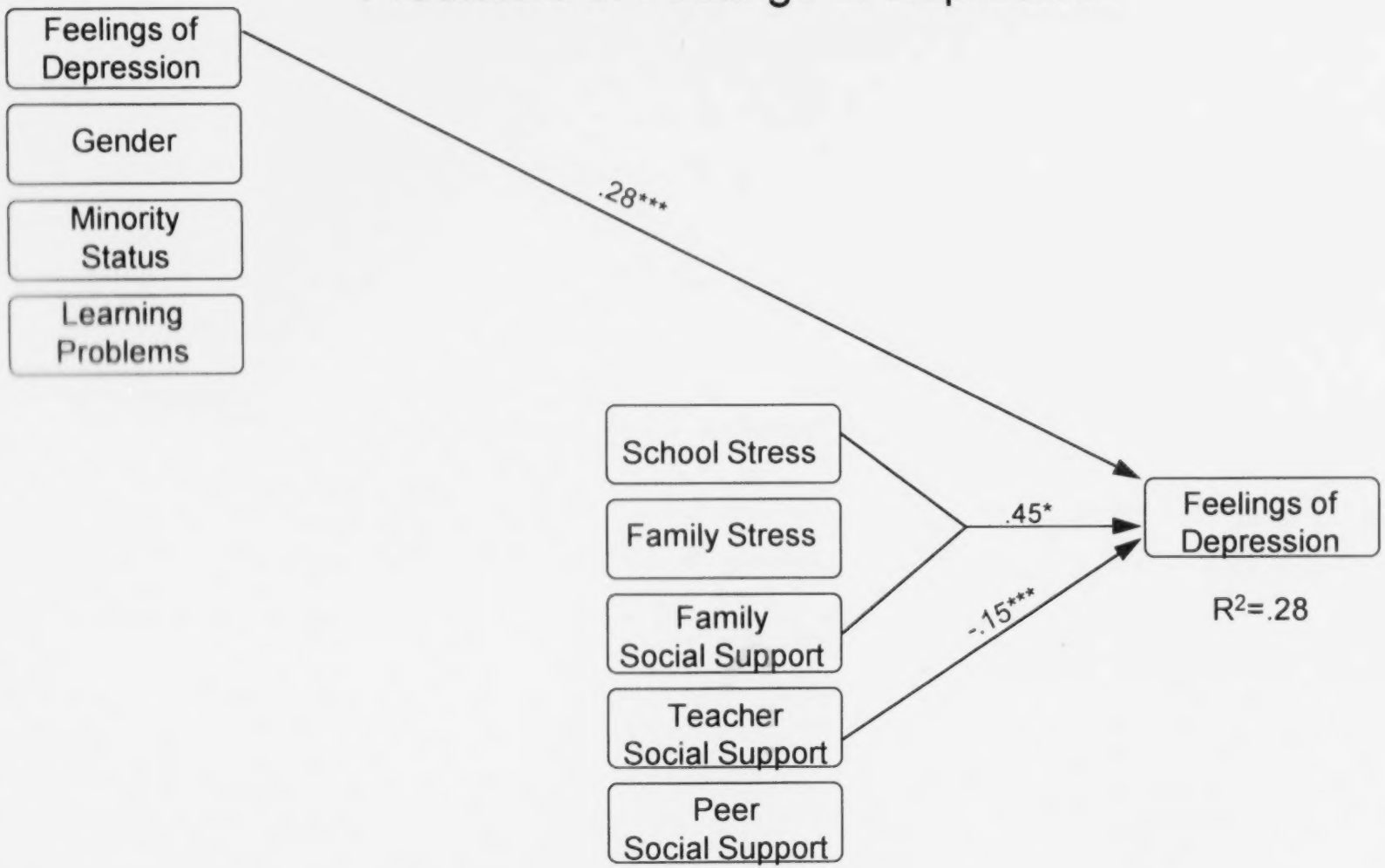
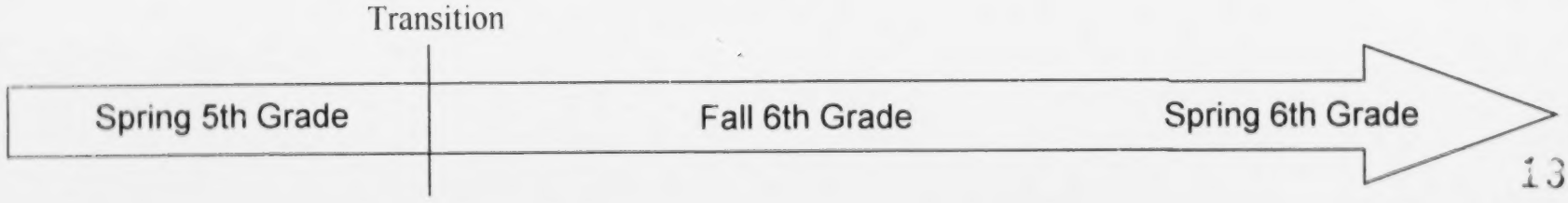
Predictors of Global Self-Concept



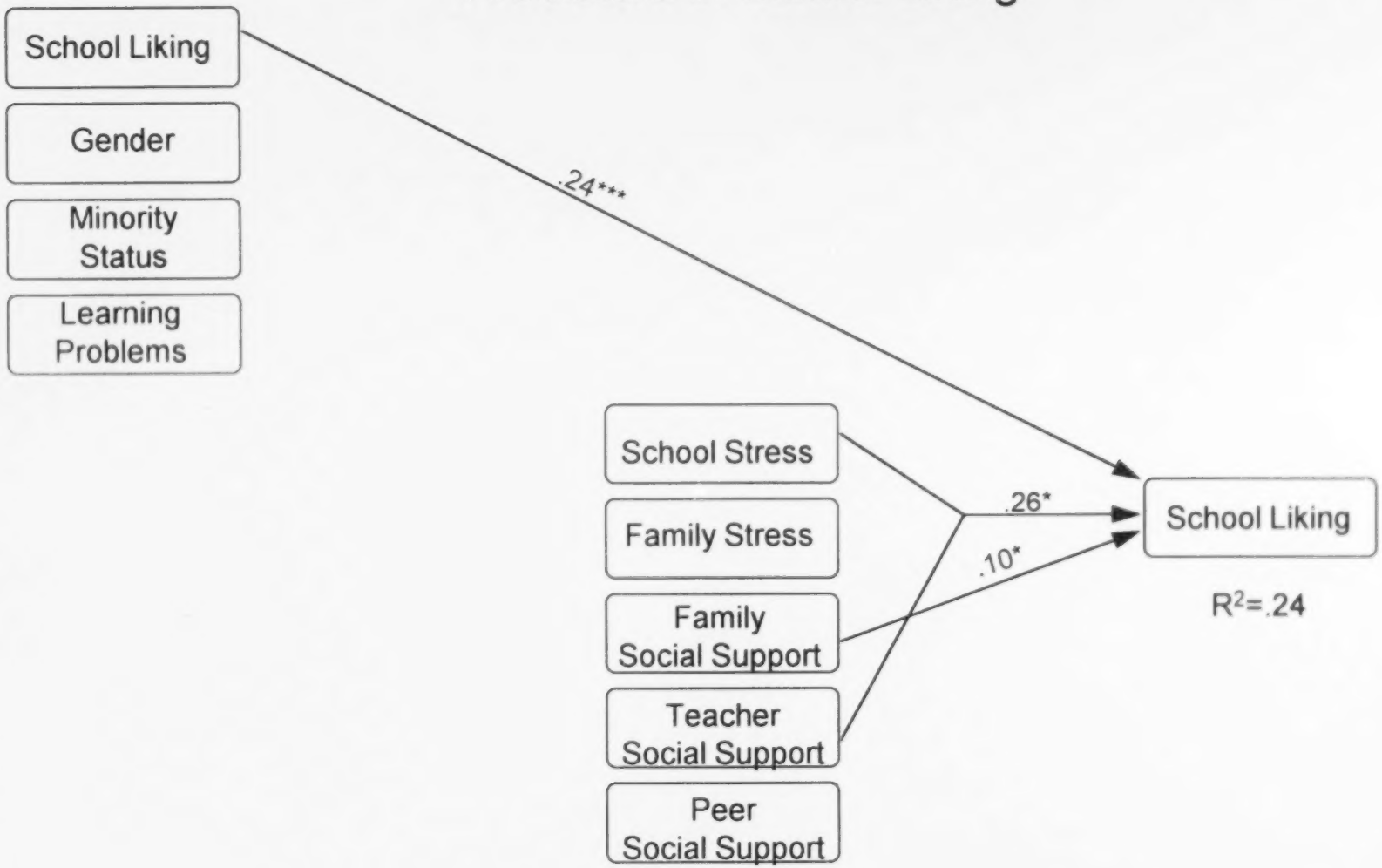


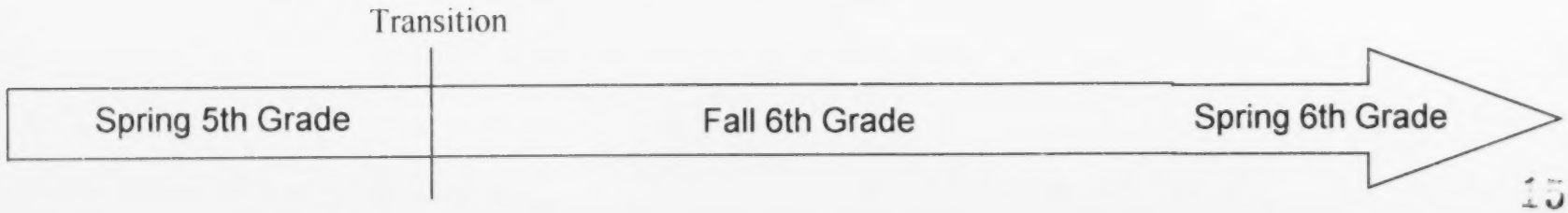
Predictors of Feelings of Depression





Predictors of School Liking





Predictors of School Stress